

## Vale Desmond Digby, the artist behind *Bottersnikes and Gumbles*

By Michael Winkler

April 17, 2015 — 11.45pm

Desmond Digby's idiosyncratic illustrations for *Bottersnikes and Gumbles* captivated young readers 40 years ago. Author Sam Wakefield created Chank, The King, Snorg, Tinkingumble and crew, but Digby's playful illustrations made the stories sing.

The *Bottersnikes* of the classic children's series are lazy and magnificently ugly. The *Gumbles* are tiny pillows of contentment with optimistic demeanours. They will be given new life in a 52-part CGI animated series due to screen in Australia and internationally next year.



Artist and stage designer Desmond Digby, who died this month.

Digby, who died at the age of 82 on April 10, was no *Bottersnike*. When I interviewed him last year at his home on the NSW north coast, my questions were mainly about the past, but he was more engaged by the present. A letter had just arrived from the author Helen Garner, the artist Warwick Gilbert wanted him to sit for an Archibald portrait, and we discussed the merits of the latest Miles Franklin shortlist.

His conversation flitted and alighted like a butterfly. A question about how he was chosen to illustrate *Bottersnikes and Gumbles* received an answer that included Robert "Bob" Hughes and his limitations as a painter, the intervention of Geoffrey Dutton, and the clinching imprimatur of the patriarch of Collins Books in Britain, Sir William Collins. "He was crazy for them!"

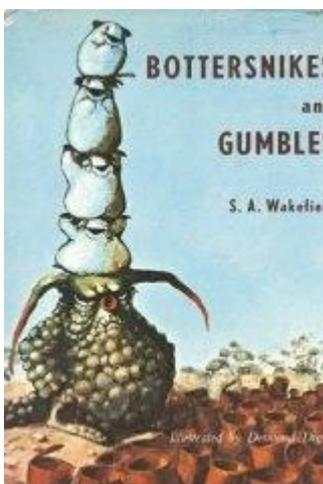


A Desmond Digby illustration from a 1970 edition of *Waltzing Matilda*.

Collins also admired and published *Waltzing Matilda* illustrated by Digby. When it won the 1971 Picture Book of the Year it was described as establishing the picture book in Australia as an art form. It has never been out of print.

Nobel laureate Patrick White collected Digby's paintings and asked him to design book covers for *The Eye of the Storm*, *The Solid Mandala* and *The Cockatoos*. White's novel *A Fringe of Leaves* is dedicated, "To Desmond Digby". "Well, yes, that was very nice. It has been suggested that we were an unlikely pair, me a non-intellectual and Mr White an intellectual. But he wasn't an intellectual, really. He was a – a person.

"We had a pure friendship. There was nothing funny." He peered significantly over the spectacles that sat low on his nose, checking his meaning had registered. "I cottoned onto him and we remained good friends all his life. Of course we had terrible rows, but the thing with PW was that you could give as good as you got."



*Bottersnikes and Gumbles*, illustrated by Desmond Digby.

The gleeful gossip "D" in *Flaws in the Glass* is in fact Digby. For a period in the late 1970s and early 1980s the friends spoke on the telephone most mornings. "When you knew him, PW was one of the funniest men you could ever meet. I would get James off to work, PW would have [partner] Manoly [Lascaris] out of the way somewhere and he'd get on the phone. We'd talk in little dribs and drabs, all over the place, here and there. I still love gossip. I'd be very upset if it wasn't delivered to me."

"James" was Digby's great love, Woollahra librarian James Allison. They met in London in the 1950s, moved to Australia in 1959 and had a third of a century together. For much of that time they lived in a flat in Kirribilli before a shared love of the beach enticed them to the coast.

Prior to this, Digby's main work was for the stage, designing sets, costumes and millinery. "I couldn't imagine anything worse than just having one big idea and working through variations of it for your whole career. More than anything, I am a collaborator. Terrible word! But one of my greatest joys was seeing everything being made properly, the set makers, the sewing of the costumes. I loved that."

The young Digby's "first London *Butterfly*" was a production starring soprano Victoria de los Angeles. He helped make the headdress Marilyn Monroe wore in *The Prince and the Showgirl*. He created head adornments for English ballerina Margot Fonteyn, designs for Glyndebourne opera house in Britain and record jackets for EMI.

"I've had a very happy life," he said. "I'm not embittered and ugly and wobbly. I have treasured friendships with famous people, not because they are famous but because they were there on the way."